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BLACKWOOD VERSUS RUSKIN.

THE "cream of the monthlies" is an expression significant of the best things from the best sources; but it can scarcely be used in connection with selections and extracts from *Blackwood's Magazine*. What with its personality, its sarcasm, its ridicule, and its Tory obstinacy, it must be characterized as the Soyer Sauce of Monthlies—its literature, as the Worcestershire Sauce of letters. *Sauce*, indeed, is its specialty; it would no more be *Blackwood* if impudence and egotism were denied it, than our Fourth-of-July orators patriots, if they were forbidden the American Eagle and Washington. It was founded to find fault, and certainly will founder if ever denied this its own inalienable right. It answers the same office in British literature that the bastinado does in the unruly school—a kind of *in terrorem* for all unlucky delinquents, according to the master's code of morals or manners. Hence, when, in some of its late numbers, it arraigned Macaulay, with a bitterness which a good chemist might have precipitated into aloes, it was performing its conscientious duty—as *Blackwood* interprets conscience, viz., the sentiment of d—n you. But, the assault rather served to divert the public than to disturb the Colossus (who, alas! has since gone the way of all earthly greatness); the game was rather above the terrors of the High Tory castigator. Wo to the wretch who is not in such a position as to be able to heave rocks and crags down upon his assailant!

Is Mr. John Ruskin the happy occupant of this Alpine height? He is one who has hurled rocks around upon his foes like Thor his Northern Lights; and if not one of the *per-aspera-ad-astra* sort of men, certainly has fought his way, whether or not he has suffered. We rather infer that, instead of suffering, he has *enjoyed* the fight to renown, and, therefore, feel quite rejoiced at the event just recorded, namely, that *Blackwood* has again opened its batteries upon him. We rejoice, because the attack is so personal as to compel Mr. Ruskin to notice it, whereas the former *passes* at him, by the successors of Kit North, passed without his retaliation, except in one notable instance. Good comes out of such a conflict of wit; and both

parties will command a wide audience. We lay before our readers a portion of the *Blackwood* article, that they may have the full benefit of its argument. So far as it relates to the laws of perspective, it has the stronger side, and Mr. Ruskin will find it no easy matter to dispose of them, if he denies their validity and force.

"Mr. Ruskin has been before the world for some years as the most voluminous, the most confident, and the most dogmatic of art-critics. He has astonished his readers no less by his platitudes than by his paradoxes. He has revealed the astounding fact that Titian and Velasquez could paint, and has made the no less surprising discovery that Raphael could not; that Rembrandt's chiaroscuro is 'always forced, generally false, and wholly vulgar;' that Murillo, Salvator, Claude, Poussin, Teniers, and 'such others,' are base and corrupt; that it is the duty of every one who happens to possess the principal works of Strange, Morghen, Longhi, and the other great line-engravers, forthwith to consign them to the flames; and that the horrors of the French Revolution were attributable to the Renaissance school of architecture. These kinds of assertions, conveyed in a light, confident, and flippant style, are amusing enough, and as long as Mr. Ruskin's audience is confined to those who have some real knowledge of the subjects of which he treats, do no harm, but pass off as the fanfaronade of some clever half-crazy talker does at the dinner-table, when no one thinks his amusing absurdities worth a serious answer, and he is tolerated as an oddity until he becomes intolerable as a bore.

"Mr. Ruskin has, however, of late appeared as a lecturer to the working classes, and a teacher of drawing to beginners in the art; and in this character he assumes, upon what ground we do not exactly know, a kind of semi-official authority.

"Now he may be, and we have no doubt is, a perfectly safe and harmless companion for the young ladies who draw at Marlborough House, but he is a dangerous guide for those who do not possess considerably more knowledge than himself: those who do, may follow his vagaries so long as they find them amusing, and quit them when they please, without much harm being done. But the persons to whom Mr. Ruskin specially addresses himself in his *Letters to Beginners* will, we are convinced, derive nothing but mischief from his teachings. We have read these

letters with attention, and we can discover no reason why Mr. Ruskin should not follow up the *Elements of Drawing* with elements of naval tactics, horsemanship, engineering, dog-breaking, political economy, rat-catching, domestic cookery, moral philosophy, and the duties of husband and wife, upon any or all of which subjects he is fully as well qualified to teach as he is to instruct beginners in the elements of drawing.

"Even so early as his Preface, Mr. Ruskin makes a display of ignorance which is perfectly astounding. He tells his pupil that 'perspective is not of the slightest use except in rudimentary work;' that 'no great painters ever trouble themselves about perspective, and very few of them know its laws;' that 'Turner, though he was Professor of Perspective to the Royal Academy, did not know what he professed, and never drew a single building in perspective in his life;' and that 'Prout also knew nothing of perspective,' and twisted his buildings, as Turner did, into whatever shapes he liked. This is precisely equivalent to saying that a knowledge of anatomy is not of the slightest use to the surgeon, that no great operator ever troubled himself about it, and that Sir Astley Cooper and Mr. Liston were utterly ignorant of the science they professed to teach.

"Drawing consists in the art of representing on a plane surface the varieties of appearance presented by natural objects as they recede from the eye. Perspective is the science which teaches the artist how to do this correctly; and when Mr. Ruskin says that 'you can draw the rounding line of a table in perspective, but you cannot draw the sweep of a sea-bay; you can foreshorten a log of wood by it, but you cannot foreshorten an arm,' he simply displays his own ignorance of the terms he uses.

"The principles which govern the foreshortening of a beam and the foreshortening of a limb are identical. It is true that the application of those principles is more difficult in the latter than in the former case, because the object to which they are applied is more varied and complex in form. Nor is the acquiring of such knowledge of perspective as is requisite for a beginner by any means so difficult a task as Mr. Ruskin represents. Let the student keep steadily in view the fact, that the impression upon his eye is produced by a ray of light reflected straight from the object he wishes to represent; let him

consider his paper as a transparent vertical plane placed between his eye and the object, and then let him observe at what point such a ray would pass through that plane; let him think this over, and practise it by holding a piece of glass between his eye and any simple object, and observing how the lines fall; and he will find his difficulties as to the principles of perspective disappear more rapidly than he would expect. But never let the student fall into the fatal error of supposing that he can safely neglect the acquirement of a knowledge of perspective. How he is to acquire that knowledge is another matter. We do not say that he must necessarily learn it from treatises. If he learns it from his own observation of nature, so much the better. But learn it he must, or he will fall into errors as gross as those which we shall show Mr. Ruskin has himself committed, when we come to consider the 'illustrations, drawn by the author,' with which he has adorned his pages. Having told his pupil what he is not to do, Mr. Ruskin next proceeds to tell him what he is to do; and since the days when Michael Scott set his troublesome demon to make ropes of sand, we have known no task so wearisome, so hopeless, and so unprofitable. He is to cover small pieces of smooth paper with a uniform grey tint, by means of an infinitude of scratches made with black ink and an extremely fine steel pen. Having accomplished the uniform tint, he is then, with the same materials, and the same instrument, and by the same means, to produce a tint graduated from perfect black to an imperceptible grey. If the ingenuity of man were employed to produce a scheme to dull the intellect and cramp the hand of a student, it would be impossible to devise one more calculated to effect those objects. To hope to draw, however imperfectly, without the devotion of time and labor, is folly; but time and labor are too valuable to be cast away—we will not say with no result, but with what is far worse, with the result of damping energy, extinguishing hope, degrading the intellect, and crippling the hand of the laborer. Such would be the inevitable consequence of a faithful adherence to Mr. Ruskin's teachings. His first lesson is to reject what is valuable; his second, to acquire, at the cost of infinite pains, what is worse than worthless.

"As he advances, the student is to exchange his square bits of paper for the capital letters of the alphabet—literally

to go to his A, B, C. Here he might, in a very imperfect way, by copying the forms of the letters, acquire some accuracy of eye and some command of the pencil; but no, even this is denied him by his inexorable taskmaster; the forms of the letters are to be set out by ruler and compasses!

"We trust that few students will follow Mr. Ruskin's instructions beyond this point. If they do, they will find themselves involved in an inextricable labyrinth of confusion, and directed to attempt the most useless and impossible things. For example, they will find that they are desired to *copy* photographs. Now a photograph is a most valuable subject for study. It enables one to refer from time to time at leisure, and while one is at work, to an accurate transcript of a great part of the work of nature. But it is a part only, and the very excellence of the photograph in that part, the minuteness and accuracy with which it records what it does contain, renders it unfit for the purpose of being copied from, by reason of the impossibility of following it accurately. At the same time, the omissions and variations which are inherent in the nature of the process, make it equally unfit, for reasons the very reverse. Photographs are necessarily affected by the local color of the objects—thus yellows print off darker, and blues lighter than in nature; and as color is universal in all natural objects, this renders them not merely useless but mischievous as copies for the student, and requires that they should be used with caution even by the accomplished artist, who may derive considerable service from them as memoranda by which to fill up the details of his sketches, or supply the defects of his memory."

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"We shall content ourselves with these two examples of the success with which Mr. Ruskin, when he has trusted himself with the pencil, has shown his contempt for perspective and optics, and shall proceed to examine an instance of equal daring in the use of the pen. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, Mr. Ruskin lays down the law upon the subject of the effect of shadow on water in the following words:

"Water receives no shadow. There is no shadow on clean water. If it have rich coloring matter suspended in it, or a dusty surface, it will take shadow; and when it has itself a positive color, as in the sea, it will take something like shadow

in the distant effect, but never near. The horizontal lines cast by clouds on the sea are *not* shadows, but reflections.'

"Then follows Mr. Ruskin's usual assertion:

"These rules are universal and incontrovertible.'

"It is difficult to say whether this passage betrays more ignorance of fact, confidence of assertion, or confusion of language. Mr. Ruskin appears not to know what shadow is. Whenever the rays of the sun are intercepted by an opaque substance, all objects beyond that substance would be in total darkness, were it not that they become partially illuminated by means of the rays reflected upon them by other surrounding objects. Shadow, therefore, is simply a deprivation of the *direct* rays of the sun; and to assert that water receives no shadow, is either an absurdity or a confusion of terms. If a cloud, a rock, or the hull of a ship, is interposed between the sun and the surface of the water, the water receives the shadow, or, to speak with more accuracy, it does not receive the *direct* rays of the sun. Now let us examine what effect is produced upon the eye of the spectator by this deprivation of light on the surface of the water. If the water were as transparent as the air on its surface, the eye would be unconscious of its existence—the ray of light which defines the edge of the shadow would pass through the water as it passes through the air, and the shadow of the object would be seen at the bottom, in the same way, allowance being made for refraction, as if there were no water at all.

"Such absolute transparency is, however, never found in nature. There is always practically *some* shadow on the surface of the water, the degree of intensity of that shadow being dependent on several circumstances, but mainly on the degree of transparency of the water. The reader may test this for himself by a very simple experiment. Let him take a wash-hand basin, half filled with clear water, and place it in bright sunshine; then let him hold a pencil or brush so that the shadow shall fall partly on the side of the basin above the water and partly on the water. He will see the shadow on the bottom of the basin refracted at the point where it impinges on the water, but he will not be able to detect any perceptible shadow on the surface of the water. Then let him

darken the water with a little sepia; he will now see at the edge of the water two shadows, one on the surface of the water, and the other on the basin, seen imperfectly through the semi-transparent water. As these shadows approach the centre of the basin, where the water is deeper, he will find the one on the basin gradually disappear, and the one on the surface of the water become deeper and more distinct.

"What Mr. Ruskin means by saying that the water of the sea 'has itself a positive color,' and that, therefore, it will take 'something like shadows,' but which we suppose are not shadows, it is utterly impossible to say. The nearest approach to absolute transparency that we have ever seen in water, is in deep sea. Mr. Ruskin's notions of the positive color of sea water may perhaps be taken from Brighton, where the sea generally looks as if Neptune had been shaving himself, and had thrown the soapsuds into it.

"To any one who watches with care the ever-varying appearance of the ocean, or of any large body of water under the influence of sunlight, clouds, and wind, it will at once be apparent that the effects which delight his eye are produced by the action of shadow falling on the constantly changing surface, combined with the reflection of the forms of objects more or less disturbed by the irregularities of that surface. He will easily discern how much is due to one cause and how much to the other, by keeping in mind that the reflection of any object must always be in a direct line between that object and his own eye, while the position of the shadow cast by the same object depends altogether upon its position in relation to the sun. Thus the shadow cast by a cloud falls upon that part of the sea between which and the sun the cloud is interposed, while the reflection of the same cloud is upon that part of the sea which appears to the eye to be in a direct line below the cloud. So, too, in regard to the effect of ripple upon the water; the side of each tiny wave which is presented toward the sun is in light, while the opposite side is in shadow. The same is true of all waves. It must, however, be always borne in mind, that the appearance presented to the eye by water depends greatly upon the angle at which it is seen, and also that, owing to its highly polished surface, it sends back, even in its shaded part, a far greater portion of the reflected light which it derives from the atmosphere and from surrounding objects than land does,

and these circumstances produce an infinite variety of effects.

"We have said enough to put the student upon his guard against supposing that he can derive any benefit from the teachings of Mr. Ruskin. When he has acquired some knowledge and proficiency in his art, he may, if he likes, read Mr. Ruskin's book to see what ought not to be taught. The rule of contrary is almost a safe one in this case. Before we quit this part of the subject, however, we must give the student a few words of advice as to what he safely may do, keeping in mind that we are addressing ourselves to those who follow art not as a professional study, but as a means of useful and delightful self-instruction. To acquire accuracy of eye and correctness of hand, he cannot do better than copy carefully, first in pencil and afterward in pen and ink, Retsch's outlines, illustrative of "Faust," "The Song of the Bell," and "The Fight with the Dragon." The illustrations of Shakespeare's Plays are very inferior. This practice will teach him accuracy and delicacy of execution. He should draw the hands, feet, and faces with extreme care, which will prepare him for afterward drawing from the round, or from the living model. Pinelli's etchings are also excellent practice. He should study, and, when more advanced, may, with great advantage, copy the facsimile engravings from the sketches of the old masters by Bartolozzi and others. Here, however, he must be upon his guard, as these etchings are full of the "pentimenti" or corrections of the artist; things invaluable, as showing how great men worked, and how sedulously they corrected any errors into which they might happen to fall, but not to be imitated. The student may rely upon it that he will make abundance of mistakes of his own without copying those of other men. In landscape, he will be fortunate if he can procure a copy of David Cox's *Young Artist's Companion*, and wise if he will work diligently through it. Failing this, Harding's *Elementary Art* is a safe and useful guide. Let him study woodcuts, but not copy any except such as have been drawn expressly for that purpose. The reason for this advice is, that the process of woodcutting is precisely the reverse of that of drawing with the pencil or pen. In woodcutting, the stroke of the graver produces a white, in drawing, the pencil, in etching or engraving, the needle

or graver, produces a dark stroke. This reversal of the process renders the woodcut, which has its own peculiar advantages in the rendering of sparkling effects (especially observable in the exquisite works of Bewick, and also in the cuts from Mr. Birket Foster's designs), unfit for a student to copy. If possible, copy drawings, not lithographs. In the lithograph, the action of the hand is unavoidably reversed; and the best way of copying them, therefore, is to place them before a glass and to copy the reflection. Always remember that the eye requires more education than the hand: and that the most important knowledge to be acquired is to know accurately what you see. To one who does not pursue art as a profession, this is the principal advantage of practising it. Even a moderate proficiency is almost equivalent to a new sense; and a man who does not draw may almost be said not to see. The student will soon feel that he hardly sees any object thoroughly until he has drawn it, or at least looked at it with the view of doing so. Do not meddle with color until you have acquired some facility in representing form accurately. Seize every opportunity of seeing and carefully examining the sketches and studies of first-rate artists—of men who *can* draw. Whatever Mr. Ruskin may say to the contrary, you will be fortunate if you are able to possess yourself of the works which he directs you to throw into the fire—the works of the great line-engravers! It is the only way in which a familiarity with the greatest works of art can be acquired by the vast majority of people. A journey to Rome or Florence, or even to Paris or Antwerp, is not possible to all men; and even when possible, it is but a very small portion of a man's life that he can afford to spend in picture-galleries. But the engraving may be always with us. It is a household friend; an arm-chair-and-slipper companion. We go to it from the turmoils, disappointments, and vexations of life, sure of a welcome. . . . Mr. Ruskin has looked at these pictures, but he has not *seen* them; he has gazed upon them with an eye insensible to woman, and a heart that has no sympathy with man. He tells us that Etty is "gone to the grave, a lost mind!" Let the blasphemer quicken his steps, and hurry stealthily past the tabernacle of Holofernes, lest the flashing sword of Judith should fall upon his head!"